



Impostors Exposed

J. W. Caldwell, "Impostors Exposed: An Experienced Spiritualist and Expert Mesmerist Explains the Tricks of Two Pseudo-Mediums, Showing That Some Things Are Not What They Seem, and That the Trickster Can Play Fast and Loose When Apparently Securely Bound," *Religio-Philosophical Journal*, October 29, 1887

To the Editor of the Religio-Philosophical Journal:

Only with a desire to benefit the cause of Spiritualism do I present the following for the columns of the Journal.

During the camp meeting season of 1887, I held developing circles at Onset, Lake Pleasant and Queen City Park daily, for nearly six weeks, and also gave a number of evening mesmeric entertainments.

Many who had never been previously influenced by mortals or spirits, by being mesmerized, soon became good mediums. I know of no other way of becoming developed so quickly for any phase of mediumship, and as nearly all can learn how to mesmerize, I often wonder that more do not.

Mesmerism, however, will not enable those not gifted by nature, to become mediums, as probably only about one to ten or a dozen are.

Although not all can become developed sufficiently to obtain spiritual manifestations, any one can learn a few tricks, and palm themselves off on unsuspecting people as genuine mediums. It was my misfortune to meet two that I believe to have done so, at Onset. I will state a few facts and leave all draw to draw their own conclusions.

By special invitation, I attended a private séance, held by C. H. Bridge, on Monday evening, Aug. 1st, 1887, at which there were present besides myself, two ladies and three gentlemen.

Mr. Bridge stated that he was about to favor us with a wonderful exhibition of spirit power—the passing of matter through matter. At his request I assisted in putting a guitar, tamborine, a tablet of writing paper on the leaves of which I was requested to see that there was no writing, and a lead pencil, into a large bag. A leather band was placed around the closed end, and secured by a padlock through holes in each end of the band. A two-cent stamp was placed over the keyhole and a private mark put on it a guarantee that it was not to be unlocked; and I was requested to retain the key. Thus secured, the bag and contents were placed in the cabinet.

Each wrist of Mr. Bridge was then securely tied to a staple, one on each side of him as he sat on a bench in front of his cabinet. A large curtain was then stretched in front of him, covering all except his head, and extending about one foot above it; and the room was then partially darkened. While he was supposed to be thoroughly secured and unable to use his hands, a drum was beat behind the curtain, and a bell thrown over onto the floor. After a few minutes of silence, the guitar slowly rose into view and was taken by an attendant. The tamborine was thrown over the curtain and a few moments later the empty bag, still locked and sealed.

A sheet of paper, purporting to have been written on, and taken from that tablet, was passed over for me, on which there was a message of one hundred and sixty-seven words. In a very fine hand and in straight lines, the name of a spirit friend who has often come to me at other séances, was signed thereto; but valueless as a test, as the name was spelled wrong. Five other messages of about equal length were passed over for the other people present, all of which we were given to understand were written by the materialized hands of our friends in the darkened cabinet in about four to five minutes. If material hands are subject to material conditions, it is hard to believe that those six messages could have been written with any pencil in less than half an hour.

At subsequent séances, under similar conditions, where it was not known beforehand (as it was at this private séance) who were coming, the messages were written in a coarse hand and haphazard way across the page; and three which I received, with the name spelled wrong in each, contained only fifteen, eighteen and twenty-seven words.

After the bag-test, and writing (at the private séance) Mr. Bridge's wrists were found to be securely tied as before the manifestations commenced.

By persistent effort I have since learned where his trick-bench was made, and that the staples to which he was tied, can be instantly detached from the seat by giving each in turn, the proper pressure and twist; thus allowing him the free use of both hands during the time he is supposed to be tied secure. Mr. Bridge next announced that he would give us the tying-test. A piece of coat braid about twenty inches in length was produced, one end of which was tied securely around his left wrist. He then sat down in a chair in the cabinet, placed his hands behind him—one on each side of the back of the chair and requested that the other end of the braid be tied around the right wrist.

Under these circumstances it is next to impossible to tie other than a slip knot as the end is tied around that part of the braid between the wrists; and is the same as was used by a "fraud," that by request of the late Dr. H. F. Gardner I once exposed before the First Spiritualist Society in Boston.

After Mr. Bridge had been tied with the braid he requested one of the company to sit facing him, and to place one hand on his (Bridge's) head, the other on his left shoulder. The curtains were drawn together and the lights lowered. After a few minutes of silence the lights were turned up and the curtains drawn back. The tamborine was on the gentleman's head and the guitar was laying across his arms. The gentleman said that he felt no motion of Mr. Bridge.

Another member of the séance sat in the same way. There was fingering of the guitar strings and some other noise, and on turning up the lights the tamborine and guitar were found as before, and the man said that he discovered no motion. By a little practice any one can slip his hand, which is done mostly while the man is taking his seat in front of the "medium" and do the trick undetected. I was tied in that way by the man Mr. Bridge employed about the Pavilion (the old hall at Onset) where he subsequently gave public séances, and after being tied, I asked him to place his hands on my head and shoulder as the sitters do on Bridge's at his séances; and for want of darkness to close his eyes. I slipped the knot, placed a hat on his head and a guitar across his arms, put my hand back, slipped the knot in its place and asked him to open his eyes. Mr. Warren Sumner Barlow, the author of "The Voices," happened to come in just then, and Bridge's hired man told him that I was tied as Mr. B. was, that I had not moved, and that some invisible power had put the guitar across his arms and a hat on his head; and that I was found by him to be tied secure.

After two or three had sat in front of Mr. Bridge at that private séance for the tying test without detecting much of any motion, he announced that he would sit for "etherealization."

The room was entirely darkened as Mr. B. sat in his cabinet alone. After a few minutes of silence an illuminated form appeared, who in a muffled voice announced himself as "Hiram Abiff," the founder of the masonic order. Nearly a dozen old musty personages of the Hiram-Abiff age of the world, including Solomon's queen, put in an appearance, all of whom might have seemed more

worthy of our respect had not Mrs. Abby Tyler exhibited the make-up of the same ancient worthies in their illuminated costumes at the Old-Pan cottage of W. W. Currier during the camp meeting at Onset this season. And besides, these were all of the same height of Mr. B.; and the tone of voice unmistakable, as his own.

A few days after the private séance it was announced that Mr. C. H. Bridge, of Boston, and Mr. Edwin Powell, of London, Eng., would hold a séance in the Pavilion on Sunday evening, Aug. 7th, on which occasion the most marvelous exhibition of spirit power ever witnessed on this continent, would take place.

Mr. Bridge was to be securely locked in a bag, and while in an unconscious trance be taken out bodily—matter to be passed through matter—the body or the bag to be disintegrated for this occasion and replaced in its original condition.

For this most wonderful manifestation, that was to eclipse all previous occult phenomena, the admission was to be only half a dollar. As was to be expected quite a large audience gathered to see this astounding exhibition. Mr. Edwin Powell was in his glory that night, as he called for a committee of two ladies and three gentlemen—skeptics preferred. That mysterious bag used at the private séance was there, and carefully scrutinized by the committee. Mr. Bridge got into it and was locked in, as were the things at the private séance already described. The curtains were drawn together and the hall entirely darkened, and we were regaled by a few thumps on the drum, which I thought he could easily accomplish alone.

Mr. Powell stated to the audience that Mr. Bridge was now in a deep trance, preparatory for the greatest event of the nineteenth century. The organist was requested to play, the audience not to move or speak, or in any way to interfere.

After nearly ten minutes of almost breathless suspense the lights were turned up and the curtains drawn apart once more. Mr. Bridge was discovered seated in his chair, and at his feet the empty bag, which the committee were requested to thoroughly examine. The two ladies and two of the gentlemen pronounced it all right and above suspicion. The third committee-man then stated to the audience that when he locked the bag he put the clasp of the pad-lock through the upper hole in one end of the leather band, but instead of finding it there now, it was through the lower hole.

Mr. Powell sprang to the front at once, and in an imperative tone of voice asked if he did not find the stamp over the key-hole as he had at first placed it. The man replied that he did. Mr. Powell in a very forcible manner insisted that that fact proved that the lock had not been tampered with, and that Mr. Bridge had been taken out of the bag by direct spirit power.

But the clasp, by being found through another hole, not the one in which it had been placed by the committee, proved most conclusively that the pad-lock was a trick-lock, such as is used by magicians, that can be opened without a key, and established the fact for all time, that instead of this manifestation for which the people paid to see being a wonderful exhibition of spirit power, it was one of the most detestable frauds ever witnessed at a spiritual camp meeting.

How Bridge Gets Names of Deceased Relatives.

At one of his public séances a lady friend of mine went into the cabinet while he was tied with the braid in the slip-knot way described. He asked her privately if there was any particular spirit that she wished to hear from. She said there was. He asked the name, which she gave. After she returned to her seat, a written message was handed out by Mr. Bridge, or a “spirit,” to Mr. Powell for the lady, which Mr. P. read and asked her if she recognized the name. She said that she did. He asked if it was a relative. She replied that it was her brother’s name. The announcement created quite a sensation. She let me read it, and in a whisper told me how he got the name, and said that as it was spelled wrong, Mr. Bridge undoubtedly wrote it himself. It commenced, “My dear friend,”

Bridge not knowing at the time it was written what connection the “spirit” was to her. At my request she attended the next séance on the following evening, and got a second communication from that “spirit,” this time commencing, “My dear sister,” and with three letters wrong in the name.

To the audience, who did not know how he obtained the name, it seemed a wonderful test. A gentleman who sat near us, asked her in a whisper if she was not pleased to get so good a test. He seemed surprised at her reply, which was, “I did not get one.”

Wednesday evening, Aug. 10th, Powell and Bridge gave an entertainment at the Temple (the new hall at Onset), it having been announced that Mr. P. would read and answer twenty-five sealed letters; and Mr. B. sit for the etherealization of spirit forms. Dr. J. V. Mansfield had read and answered one at the same place, at the close of a previous entertainment by other parties; and a large audience assembled to see twenty-five times as wonderful a display of psychic phenomena as Dr. Mansfield had done.

After a few remarks by Mr. Powell, he asked Mr. Bridge to distribute twenty-five pieces of paper and as many envelopes among the audience. He requested that short, plain questions be written on the papers, and one of each be sealed in an envelope. As he did not wish to see who wrote he would retire into the ante-room. Mr. Bridge distributed the papers and envelopes as requested, and after he had gathered them, instead of going onto the platform in plain view of the audience as he could have done, he went on through the back way.

As twenty-five envelopes and papers were passed out, and only twenty-four read, a very important question is, What became of the other? The only rational answer is that he probably gave it to Mr. Powell in the ante-room before depositing the others on a table at the front of the platform.

Some one in the audience had given Mr. Bridge a sealed envelope of a different color and size which was laid at the bottom of the pile, and which Mr. Powell could not read. I have seen the old, old trick of answered sealed letters by sleight-of-hand performers, till I know it “like a book;” and this was a facsimile of the same thing. It is almost identical with the pretended reading and answering of sealed letters by Nelson Holmes, at the Maryland Institute in Baltimore, Md., some four or five years ago, which by special request of the President of the Spiritualist Society of that city, I exposed at the close of the Sunday evening lecture by C. Fannie Allyn, for which I received a vote of thanks from the audience.

I feel quite positive that Mr. Powell got one of the envelopes from Mr. Bridge and learned its contents. Having done this, it is an easy matter to appear to read and answer all the others (except the one mentioned of a different size and color). After he came from the ante-room with the knowledge of one letter in his mind, he took one of the envelopes from the pile on the table, looked very wise for a few moments, and said that the spirit who had been addressed passed out in California; and that his name was Flowers, which fact he probably learned from that letter in the ante-room. After a few remarks he asked if the answer was recognized. ‘Some one replied that it was correct.

Mrs. Hacker, who sat near me, remarked, “Wonderful, aint it?” and was surprised as I answered “No.”

After Mr. Mansfield had read a sealed letter, on that platform, only a few days before, he gave it to some one to open, who found that Mr. M. had read it correctly. Instead of handing the envelope to a third party to open, as Mr. Mansfield had, Mr. Powell said, “Allow me to open it to see if I have read it correctly.” He tore off one end of the envelope, took out the piece of paper, read it to himself, and handed the paper and envelope to Mr. Bridge.

Having learned what was written in that, he picked up another and pretended to answer that one, from, in all human probability, what he had read in the last one. And so on, to the one of different

size and color, which he claimed to be unable to read, because, as he stated, he had not carried it, as he had the others, six hours in his pocket to magnetize them. Had he attempted to read it by the same process as the others, the writer would have noticed the deception at once.

That my supposition is correct, is evident from the fact that he gave all of the envelopes to Mr. Bridge to hold after he had read their contents. Whereas, human nature being about the same in all, there is probably nothing that he would have done sooner than to have let some disinterested person open at least one of those envelopes after he had read it, and thus forever established the fact that he had read a letter in a sealed envelope. And again, I subsequently offered him twenty-five dollars to answer one sealed letter, if on its being opened by a third party, it had been read correctly. His only answer was considerable abusive language before a number of people, and insinuation that I was not able to raise that much money.

I hereby pledge myself to put \$100 into the hands of the editor of the Religio-Philosophical Journal, to be paid to Mr. Powell whenever he shall have satisfactorily, to a disinterested party, answered or read as many sealed letters as he pretended to at Onset. One lady who had folded her paper in a peculiar way noticed that Mr. Powell took that from the envelope after he had apparently read a question for some one else; and that he took out quite a differently folded paper, from the one she sealed up after answering her question. To give you all the interesting details would add too much to this already too lengthy article.

J. W. Caldwell.
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